

Intrigue for a Big Legacy Behind Mexican Jailbreak

How Kaplan's Friends and Relatives Tried for Years To Get Him Out of Jail

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There is a world of international adventurers, of would-be soldiers of fortune who, for a price, can be hired to take on the most outlandish schemes from aerial bombings of a Latin American capital to training and equipping a mercenary army.

It is a world populated by part-time private investigators, restless ex-members of the United States Army Special Forces, ex-convicts and ordinary citizens who hold respectable jobs and occasionally disappear for a few weeks, only to return with harrowing tales of adventure.

It was a man known among these ranks, Victor E. Stadter, 50, of Glendora, Calif., who was at the controls of a small rented airplane that landed at Brownsville, Tex., shortly before midnight on August 18 to add the last touch to an extraordinary rescue.

With Stadter in the airplane was Joel David Kaplan, 44, a wealthy man given to international intrigue who, relatives feared, might be forced to finish his 28-year murder sentence or die in a Mexican prison. Kaplan maintains the murder charge is false.

ESCAPE

Earlier that night while prison guards were preoccupied watching a movie in the Santa Maria Acatitla peni-

tentiary near Mexico City, a helicopter dropped inside the walls, picked up Kaplan and another prisoner and disappeared.

Kaplan had been in prison nine years and it was necessary to bring him into the U.S. legally, according to relatives, so that he could claim an inheritance held in a trust fund in New York City.

So Stadter and Kaplan notified the U.S. Customs at Brownsville that they were arriving and were met, searched and then cleared. Kaplan is now in the U.S. and in hiding.

Stadter, who apparently masterminded the entire escape, was contacted by telephone at his home in Glendora.

"Not another person alive

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knows this story but me," he said. "We were very careful so that no one person would know everything."

HIDING

He said "Joel needs help" and that he would be kept in hiding until things quiet down.

In the Sausalito home of the rescued man's sister, Judith Dowis, there was an air of relief last week.

"I couldn't be happier," said Mrs. Dowis, 40, a divorcee. She said her understanding was that her brother could not claim his inheritance held at the U.S. Trust Co. in New York City unless he was legally in the nation.

The administrator of the trust, Barry Waldorf, contacted by telephone in New York City, said only: "I am not free to give you any kind of a comment on anything to do with his affairs."

A spokesman for the U.S. Department of Justice said Kaplan is not sought by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

And in Mexico City, his attorney, Victor Velazquez, 74, said he had broken no law there. He said that there is a gap in Mexican law regarding prison breaks. It is only a crime to break out of prison if violence is used.

INTRIGUE

Those who knew Kaplan before his conviction said he was intrigued by what one man called "the swamp of Caribbean politics," when he began working in his late father's sugar and molasses business after serving in the Navy in World War II.

When he entered Mexico in 1961, he was with three other

men, one of them a business associate, Luis M. Vidal Jr., whom Velazquez described as a gun-runner.

Kaplan at the time was president of the American Sucrose Co. and Vidal was company treasurer.

BODY

The body of a man said to be Vidal was found shot four times in the head and buried in a shallow grave in Mexico in November, 1961.

Velazquez said the body was that of a heavy, bald man in his 80s with bad teeth and a straight nose while Vidal was in his 30s, athletic, dark-haired, flat-nosed and had good teeth. No fingerprints and no X-rays of the teeth were ever taken, Velazquez said.

Mexican authorities thought the body was the real one, however, and Kaplan was convicted and sentenced to 28 years in the penitentiary.

Over the years, a series of escape plans were tried. All failed and, according to a source close to the family, hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent in vain attempts to free him.

One scheme involved hiding Kaplan in a laundry truck. Another involved attempting to bribe the prison warden to drive him out in the warden's personal car to meet a waiting jet airplane.

ESCAPE

The story of the escape, as pieced together from reports in the American and Mexican press, interviews with

those involved and with American government officials, is largely as follows:

A Bell plastic top helicopter was purchased from Natrona Services, Inc., a uranium exploration firm in Casper, Wyo., for a reported \$25,000. It left an airport at McAllen, Tex., the morning before the escape and, making several stops on the way, arrived in Mexico City on the evening of August 18.

When it got to the jail, all but five prison guards were watching a motion picture called "The Altar of Blood" and it landed in the jail's large rear patio.

Kaplan and another prisoner, Carlos Antonio Contreras Castro, 36, ran to the helicopter. The pilot, identified by Mexican police as Roger Guy Hershner, 29, of Glendora, Calif., then lifted them out of the prison yard without a shot being fired or an alarm sounded.

VISIT

Two hours before the helicopter arrived, Kaplan was visited by his Mexican-born wife, Irma Vasquez Calderon de Kaplan and a man identified as Harvey Orville Dayle.

Mrs. Kaplan, who was later arrested, told police she

left her husband and Dayle alone while they "talked business."

Once out of the prison, the helicopter flew to Actopan, Mexico, where it was met by a light plane piloted by Stadter, according to Mexican authorities.

The three men then flew to La Pesca, Mexico, where Castro, also a pilot, flew off alone in a light plane apparently for Guatemala.

Stadter and Kaplan then crossed the border and, outside of Brownsville, radioed they were landing and identified themselves for U.S. customs officials.

After the escape, riot police surrounded the prison. The penitentiary director and a large number of the prison staff were arrested.

Kaplan's uncle, J. M. Kaplan of New York City, said in a telephone interview that his nephew had once claimed to be an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. But Velasquez said he did not think the CIA was involved in the escape "because they would not have waited almost 10 years to get him out and they could probably have done so through official channels."



JOEL D. KAPLAN
A copter freed him